

Daily News

Rejuvenated lives on display, front and center

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Francis Flan and children Israel Flan, Angie Gutierrez, and Amy Gutierrez listen as Family Preservation Coordinator Jennifer Fentress Calderon speaks about their return to their mother from foster care. The Department of Children and Family Services West San Fernando Valley Office will hosted an open house reception as part of the county's weeklong Family Reunification Week. (Hans Gutknecht/Staff Photographer) (Hans Gutknecht)



Shallyne Sarkissian becomes emotional as she talks about the return of her children as Family...

The success stories sat in the front row, right where they belonged. Every once in awhile, they'd peek over their shoulders at the crowded room behind them - looking a little uneasy about getting the VIP treatment.

They were not used to it. They were used to people shaking their heads at them in disgust or pity, not applauding them.

But on Wednesday, 32-year-old Shallyne Sarkissian stood in front of a packed room of social services professionals, wiping away tears with a borrowed napkin and thanking them for not giving up on her.

She had been a rotten mother. Worse, a criminal one. When police arrested her a couple of years ago, she said, her apartment was filled with drugs and she was high as a kite.

She didn't even know her young daughter was there, watching it all.

"I was always leaving her when I went out doping," Shallyne said softly. "I didn't want her around."

She didn't have to worry. When she was convicted of child endangerment and sent to jail for 55 days, her daughter went to live with her paternal grandparents.

Shallyne was determined to get the youngster back, but she knew it was something she would have to earn. She spent those couple of months in jail thinking about it.

"I reported to my probation officer and stayed clean," she said. "I went back to school to become a dental hygienist and nine months later, I got my daughter back."

And now here she was a year later, being applauded as a success story by the Los Angeles County Department of Children & Family Services, the San Fernando Valley Community Mental Health Center, Project Safe, Valley Trauma Center and other local social services agencies.

"You all understand how I feel today, I love you," Shallyne said, singling out her counselor, Jennifer Fentress Calderon.

"Right now my daughter's at school, and I'll be picking her up later. I can't wait. Life is good."

Life is good again for Francis Flan, who sat in the front row with three of her children. She was a victim of domestic violence and had to go into hiding.

She was one of the 16,000 referrals the Department of Children & Family Services were called to investigate last year in the San Fernando Valley.

For their own safety, her children spent a month in foster care then lived with an aunt for six months before Francis could get her life and kids back with the help of the professionals in this room.

"It was terrible leaving my children, but there was no way to get away from this man," Francis said. "They had to go. I was afraid for them."

When she knew the beatings were about to come, she sent her children to a nearby park so they did not see the violence, said her oldest daughter, who was recently honored by the Los Angeles Unified School District for a perfect attendance record.

During Family Reunification Week, the Department of Children & Family Services, along with some dedicated local nonprofit social services agencies, wanted you to know there are many success stories out there.

A few of them were sitting in the front row.